

Spiritual Olympians: Running
Heb. 12:1-3
Sept. 5, 2004
Kory Wilcoxson

This week we conclude our training regimen on “Becoming Spiritual Olympians.” We’ve practiced our faith by daring to swim or walk on water to Jesus, and we’ve strengthened our faith by lifting the weight of Jesus’ yoke. This morning, we’ll talk about how we can perfect our faith by finishing the race laid out before us.

I’m glad we’re not racing against some of this year’s Olympic competitors. Justin Gatlin claimed the title of World’s Fastest Man by running 100 meters, roughly the length of a football field, in 9.85 seconds. I can’t even get to the refrigerator and back that fast.

Luckily, the race we are called to run as Christians is not one based on speed, but as the author of Hebrews tells us, on perseverance. It was a message the readers of this letter would have needed to hear. Hebrews is addressed to a group of Jews who were struggling with whether or not to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. Some of them were very skeptical, and others had decided to believe it but were now considering abandoning that belief and returning to their more familiar Judaism.

So the author of Hebrews uses the letter to prove that Jesus was the Messiah and the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecies in order to persuade those Jews who were sitting on the fence about their beliefs or who were experiencing hardships and persecution because of these new beliefs. After making his argument, in chapter 11 he shows the readers how all their forefathers in faith persevered through hard times and kept their faith strong.

Then we come to our passage for today. It’s as if the writer has taken his readers to a Hall of Fame and said, “See all those people on the wall? Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses. They ran the race until the end. They finished what they started, despite the hurdles and obstacles. Because they did it, you can do it, too. Don’t give up. Run the race.” He calls these heroes of faith a “cloud of witnesses.” But they are not witnesses in that they are simply watching what is happening; they are witnesses in that they have testified to the goodness of God through the way that they lived, the way that they ran the race. Because of their witness to us, we can be confident in our own race.

We can say the same here at CCC. Although our church is only 40 years old, we have a number of people we can point to for examples of running the race. Allen Ahlquist, Agnes Adams, Frank Herold, Herb Gould. These are people who have finished the race, who are witnesses to God’s work in this world through the way they lived and the way they served, and who have now crossed the finish line.

Not only does this church have a cloud of witnesses, but so do each of us personally. We all have people that we can point to as being instrumental in our faith story. My grandfather that just passed away is one of my witnesses surrounding me. In his last year he was so sick and his body so broken, but more often than not he was there in church on Sunday morning, passing out candy to all the kids and some of the adults.

What witnesses are surrounding you? Who are people you point to as heroes in your life, people who were there for you when you needed them, people who walked beside you during an important time on your faith journey? Do you have someone in

mind? Now, ask yourself this: What obstacles did they overcome? Through what hardships did they persevere? This passage invites us to look back over our shoulders and remember those who have run before us.

With that as our encouragement, we are then told what we have to do to run the race. We are to throw off everything that hinders and the sin that entangles, and run the race with perseverance that has been marked out for us.

I don't know if you saw this, but a bizarre thing happened during this year's Olympic marathon. Vanderlei de Lima of Brazil was leading the race at the 22-mile marker when he was attacked and forced off the road by a lunatic in a red kilt. To me, that is what happens to us sometimes in our race. We're running along just fine when we're suddenly surprised or attacked by something that threatens to slow us down or knock us off course. So often we get entangled in something that's keeping us from running our race.

Sometimes these are things of our own doing, bad choices we make, sins we commit. On the old Saturday Night Live there was a commercial spoof of Wheaties. In it, John Belushi, not a small man, was shown in a track outfit winning sprint after sprint. And then we see him at the breakfast table eating of bowl of his "secret training ingredient": little chocolate donuts, the breakfast of champions. How often do we weigh ourselves down with bad decisions that keep us from running our race?

Other things that weigh us down are things out of our control, things like deaths and illnesses, job losses or broken relationships. And these things can be so devastating, so demoralizing, that we just don't feel like running anymore. And in these dark times, we are tempted to look at other people's lives, at how blessed they are, at how unentangled they seem to be, and we wonder, "Why isn't that my race?"

Hebrews tells us that the race we run has been marked out especially for us. This is the race we've been given to run. Just as each runner in a race is assigned to a lane, so we must run our race. It's tempting to be envious of the runner next to us. But that won't make our race go away or get any shorter or easier. All we can do is run our race.

I don't know if you saw any of the women's races this year, but in one of the early heats, there was a female runner from Afghanistan, quite an amazing thing when you think about it. She was in full dress, even had a head covering on when she ran. I'd love to tell you she won her heat, but she finished dead last, several seconds behind the next person. She wasn't fast. But just running the race sent a powerful message.

I can't imagine what she went through to even be at those games. Like that woman, the course we run will have obstacles. We've all faced some of them already, hurdles thrown in our path that threaten to trip us up or cause us to give up on our faith and stop running. We can be frustrated by failure and hamstrung by hardships. But we must remember that even when the race is tough, our bodies are aching, and everything seems to be falling apart, there is still something with us that is strengthening us, encouraging us, calling us to persevere.

James 1:2-3 says, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing." The trials we face produce in us perseverance, and our ability to persevere brings us to a new level of maturity in our faith. The way we persevere in our race is through God's strength and encouragement. And we gain access to those by looking

beyond ourselves to all those who have come before us, those who have faced their own hardships and obstacles, and yet who still finished the race.

There's one more example for us to draw strength from of someone who has already run the race. Hebrews says, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

The Bible translation "The Message" says it this way: "Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed – that exhilarating finish in and with God – he could put up with anything along the way: cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!"

Jesus is the author and perfecter of our faith. Not only did he create it, he made it perfect, by facing the ultimate hurdle. Like Olympic hurdles, his was also made of wood, but it was in the form of a cross. But he still finished the race. And if our Savior could endure the greatest of pain and torture, and still finish the race, then we are not to grow weary or lose heart. The promise we have been given is that we will finish. If we have faith and persevere, we are guaranteed of finishing, because Jesus finished it first. It's both a paradox and a blessing that though we wander and stray and stumble through our own races, we can be assured of finishing because the one who went before us ran it perfectly. He has marked the path for us. We are simply called to follow it and finish the race. May the belief that Christ completed the race first and the promise that he awaits us at the end be the adrenaline for our souls that keeps us running and running and running.